

In the Claims:

1 Claim 1 (currently amended): A method of enhancing voice mail messages ~~by incorporating a~~
2 ~~selected background sound with a voice mail message~~ for playback to a listener, further
3 comprising steps of:
4 storing a voice mail message;
5 separately storing a background sound that has been selected for incorporating with the
6 voice mail message;
7 responsive to a request from the listener for playback of the stored voice mail message,
8 incorporating the separately-stored background sound with the stored voice mail message; and
9 playing back a result of the incorporating step.

1 Claim 2 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, wherein a plurality of
2 background sounds have been selected for incorporating with the voice mail message, and further
3 comprising the steps of:
4 storing the voice mail message as comprises a plurality of message segments; and
5 separately storing the plurality of selected background sounds, such that , and wherein
6 one or more selected background sounds are incorporated; each of the selected background
7 sounds which is associated with one or more of the message segments;
8 wherein the incorporating step incorporates each separately-stored background sound
9 with its associated message segment(s).

Claims 3 - 4 (canceled)

1 Claim 5 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, wherein at least one of the
2 selected background sounds is a theme song associated with a speaker who leaves the voice mail
3 message.

1 Claim 6 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, further comprising the step of
2 separately storing an ~~inserting a selected~~ audio file ~~that has been selected for inserting~~ into the
3 voice mail message (1) between two successive ones of the message segments, (2) prior to a first
4 one of the message segments, or (3) following a last one of the message segments, and wherein
5 the incorporating step further comprises the step of inserting the separately-stored audio file
6 between the two message segments, prior to the first message segment, or following the last
7 message segment, respectively ~~for the playback to the listener.~~

1 Claim 7 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, wherein each of a plurality of
2 audio files have been selected for inserting into the voice mail message between a selected pair of
3 successive ones of the message segments, and further comprising the step of separately storing
4 the selected audio files, such that each of the selected audio files is associated with the selected
5 pair of message segments; and wherein the incorporating step further comprises the step of
6 inserting ~~each of the separately-stored one or more selected~~ audio files ~~between the successive~~
7 ~~ones of the message segments in its associated pair into the voice mail message for the playback~~
8 ~~to the listener.~~

1 Claim 8 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected
2 background sound is explicitly selected by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 Claim 9 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2 1, wherein the ~~one or more~~
2 selected background sounds is ~~are~~ selected programmatically, based on a speaker-specific,
3 device-independent identifier provided by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 Claim 10 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the steps
2 of:

3 enabling a speaker of the voice mail message to explicitly select the background sound;

4 and

5 using wherein the selected background sound is a default background sound as the
6 selected background sound, without intervention from the for a speaker of the voice mail
7 message, when the speaker does not explicitly select the background sound.

1 Claim 11 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected
2 background sound is programmatically ~~a dynamically-selected choice~~ selected from among a
3 plurality of background sounds, based on a date on which a speaker leaves the voice mail
4 message for storing.

1 Claim 12 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more
2 selected background sounds are programmatically ~~dynamically~~ selected from among a plurality

3 of background sounds that are available on a telephone device ~~or telephone system~~ from which
4 the voice mail message originates.

Claim 13 (canceled)

1 Claim 14 (currently amended): The method according to Claim ~~12 or Claim 13~~ 1, wherein the
2 selected background sound is selected ~~dynamic selection is performed~~ randomly from a plurality
3 of available background sounds.

for Claim 15 (currently amended): The method according to Claim ~~12 or Claim 13~~ 1, wherein the
2 selected background sound is selected ~~dynamic selection is performed~~ using a profile associated
3 with a speaker of the voice mail message, without intervention of the speaker.

1 Claim 16 (currently amended): The method according to Claim ~~12 or Claim 13~~ 1, wherein the
2 background sound is automatically selected, ~~dynamic selection is performed~~ based upon an
3 identification of an intended recipient of the voice mail message, without intervention of a
4 speaker of the voice mail message.

1 Claim 17 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected
2 background sound is selected based on its having been configured as is a device-specific single
3 selection to be used with voice mail messages from ~~that is available on~~ a telephone device ~~or~~
4 ~~telephone system~~ from which the stored voice mail message originates.

1 Claim 18 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, wherein the one or more
2 selected background sounds are dynamically selected, by a speaker of the voice mail message,
3 from among a plurality of background sounds that are available to an apparatus on which the
4 voice mail message is stored ~~recorded~~.

Claim 19 (canceled)

1 Claim 20 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of
2 transmitting the selected background sound from a telephone device ~~or telephone system~~ used by
3 a speaker of the voice mail message.

B2

1 Claim 21 (original): The method according to Claim 20, wherein the selected background sound
2 has been compressed prior to the transmitting.

1 Claim 22 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, wherein the plurality of
2 selected background sounds are selected by ~~further comprising the step of~~ transmitting identifiers
3 thereof of each of the selected background sounds from a telephone device ~~or telephone system~~
4 used by a speaker of the voice mail message.

1 Claim 23 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 2, wherein the selected
2 background sound is selected by ~~further comprising the step of~~ transmitting an address thereof ~~of~~

3 ~~each of the selected background sounds~~ from a telephone device ~~or telephone system~~ used by a
4 speaker of the voice mail message, wherein ~~each~~ the transmitted address is usable for locating
5 ~~may be used to locate~~ a file containing ~~a respective one of~~ the selected background sounds.

1 Claims 24 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 23, wherein the transmitted
2 address is a Uniform Resource Locator.

Claims 25 - 27 (canceled)

82
1 Claim 28 (currently amended): The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected
2 background sound has been ~~may be~~ selected using one ~~or more~~ of: a dual-tone multi-frequency
3 (DTMF) capability of a telephone used by a speaker of the voice mail message; a touch-sensitive
4 display screen of the telephone; ~~automated instructions stored on or executed by the telephone or~~
5 ~~a telephone system of the speaker~~; a key sequence operated using keys of the telephone; or a
6 voice recognition capability, ~~which may be~~ provided by a voice messaging system which records
7 the voice mail message for storing.

Claims 29 - 33 (canceled)

1 Claim 34 (currently amended): A method of enhancing voice mail messages ~~by inserting a~~
2 ~~selected audio file into a voice mail message~~ for playback to a listener, further comprising steps
3 of:

4 storing a voice mail message as a plurality of message segments;
5 separately storing one or more audio files, each of which has been selected for inserting
6 into the voice mail message (1) between one or more selected pairs of successive ones of the
7 message segments, (2) prior to a first one of the message segments, and/or (3) following a last
8 one of the message segments, such that each of the selected audio files is associated with the first
9 one of the message segments, the last one of the message segments, and/or the selected pair(s) of
10 message segments, respectively; and
11 inserting each of the audio files between the successive ones of the message segments in
12 its associated pair(s), prior to the associated first one of the message segments, and/or following
13 the associated last one of the message segments, as appropriate, as the voice mail message is
14 played back to the listener.

52
Claims 35 - 36 (canceled)

1 Claim 37 (currently amended): The method according to Claim ~~35~~ 34, wherein at least one of
2 the audio files is an audio signature associated with a speaker ~~who records~~ of the voice mail
3 message.

Claims 38 - 42 (canceled)

1 Claim 43 (currently amended): A method of merchandising pre-recorded sound files, further
2 comprising steps of:

3 marketing a telephone device that has one or more receiving requests for selected ones of
4 the pre-recorded sound files locally accessible, such that telephone calls initiated from the
5 telephone device can be delivered to recipients with one or more of the pre-recorded sound files
6 blended with a voice message of the initiated telephone call, for use as background files to be
7 incorporated with voice mail messages and/or for use as audio files to be inserted into voice mail
8 messages; and
9 providing the selected ones, in response to the step of receiving requests.

Claims 44 - 45 (canceled)

1 ^{b2} Claim 46 (currently amended): A method of improving telephone conversations, comprising the
2 steps of:
3 selecting, by a caller, incorporating a selected background sound to be incorporated into a
4 telephone conversation between a the caller and a called party;
5 enabling the called party to choose whether the selected background sound will be
6 suppressed instead of incorporated; and
7 incorporating the selected background sound into the telephone conversation only if the
8 called party does not choose to suppress it.

Claims 47 - 66 (canceled)

1 Claim 67 (currently amended): A system of enhancing voice mail messages, comprising:

2 ~~one or more audio files;~~

3 means for storing a plurality of voice mail messages, each message comprising one or
4 more message segments;

5 means for associating, with individual ones of the stored voice mail messages, zero or
6 more selecting at least one of the audio files; and

7 means for enabling a listener to preview the stored voice mail messages by selectively
8 playing back one or more of the audio files associated therewith ~~inserting the selected at least one~~
9 ~~audio file into the voice mail message for playback to a listener.~~

1 Claim 68 (currently amended): The system according to Claim 67, wherein ~~at least~~ one of the
2 audio files associated with at least one of the stored voice mail messages is an audio signature of
3 ~~associated with a speaker of who records~~ the voice mail message and wherein the means for
4 enabling further comprises means for enabling the listener to selectively preview the stored voice
5 mail messages by playing back the audio signature associated therewith.

Claims 69 - 88 (canceled)

1 Claim 89 (new): The system according to Claim 67, further comprising means for inserting, into
2 a selected one of the stored voice mail messages, the audio file(s) associated therewith when
3 playing back the selected voice mail message to the listener.

1 Claim 90 (new): The method according to Claim 20, wherein a telephone call placed by the

2 speaker is transparently extended, without intervention of the speaker, following the speaker's
3 completion of the voice mail message, and wherein the transmission occurs during the
4 transparent extension, after which the transparently-extended telephone call is automatically
5 ended.

1 Claim 91 (new): The method according to Claim 43, wherein different telephone devices are
2 marketed that have different collections of pre-recorded sound files.

1 Claim 92 (new): The method according to Claim 1, wherein the selected background sound is
2 programmatically selected from among a plurality of background sounds by applying a set of
3 rules that indicates how to select from the plurality of background sounds, under particular
4 conditions.

br

1 Claim 93 (new): The method according to Claim 1, further comprising the step of enabling the
2 listener to choose to suppress the incorporating of the background sound with the voice mail
3 message, in which case the playing back step plays back the stored voice mail message without
4 the stored background sound.

1 Claim 94 (new): The method according to Claim 46, wherein the selected background sound is
2 programmatically selected based on an identification of the called party.

1 Claim 95 (new): The method according to Claim 46, wherein the enabling step further comprises

- 2 the step of allowing the called party to choose to suppress all background sound from telephone
 - 3 conversations initiated by the caller.
-